United Nations A/C.4/63/SR.14

General Assembly
Sixty-third session

Official Records

Distr.: General
12 December 2008

Original: English

Special Political and Decolonization Committee (Fourth Committee)

Summary record of the 14th meeting
Held at Headquarters, New York, on Wednesday, 22 October 2008, at 3 p.m.

Chairman: Mr. Argüello ..... (Argentina)
later: Mr. Elsherbini (Vice-Chairman) ..... (Egypt)

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08-56403 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

Agenda item 32: Questions relating to information (*continued*) (A/63/21 and A/63/258)

1. **Mr. Akasaka** (Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information), introducing the report of the Secretary-General (A/63/258), said that the work of the Department of Public Information was guided by five objectives. These were: adoption of a strategic approach that emphasized priorities and early preparation, improved coordination, promotion of support for the United Nations by creating new partnerships — including with the television and film industries, non-governmental organizations, the business community and young people — and expanding old ones, promotion of multilingualism and, lastly, incorporation of internal evaluation as a tool for assessing the impact of its work.

2. As part of its efforts to disseminate information about the United Nations and its objectives, the Department, in close cooperation with its United Nations system partners, had executed major media campaigns for the high-level event on the Millennium Development Goals and the high-level meeting on Africa's development needs. The campaigns had been launched during the opening of the sixty-third session of the General Assembly and had yielded largely positive coverage, including hundreds of articles in 57 countries.

3. Conscious of the need to expand its partnerships with civil society and non-governmental organizations, the Department had, for the first time, held its yearly conference for non-governmental organizations away from Headquarters, in Paris. Funded by the Government of France with support from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the conference had been attended by more than 1,100 participants representing 461 non-governmental organizations from 65 countries.

4. Another step aimed at broadening the Department's outreach was the planned launch of a new journal entitled "*UN Affairs*", which was to be the successor to the quarterly *UN Chronicle*. The commitment to provide assistance to the Palestinian people was reflected in the Department's training programme for Palestinian journalists and the annual international media seminar on peace in the Middle East.

5. United Nations information centres were playing an increasingly important role in the Department's outreach activities and were producing information materials in 130 languages and maintaining websites in 30 local languages. In that connection, the Department would soon launch a new website, in all six official languages, that would serve as a portal to the websites of individual information centres.

6. Turning to the need for internal evaluation of Department activities and services, he said that he intended to hold every project manager accountable for his own area of responsibility and that the Department would increasingly rely on user feedback in order to derive lessons and action points for application by managers. For example, after analysing how its partner radio stations in China had been using its programmes, the Department's Chinese Unit had decided to form two shifts in order to provide clients with more frequently updated news.

7. Although the Department had many new projects planned, implementation would be contingent on the availability of resources. The budget for the information centres, in particular, was being stretched to the breaking point. The centres had suffered directly from rising fuel and utility costs, currency fluctuations and the ever-increasing need for enhanced security. As a result, their ability to engage fully the audiences they were meant to serve had been severely constrained, particularly as regards production of materials in local languages. Looking ahead to the 2010-2011 biennium, the Department might be forced to reduce its operations in the field. In that connection, he expressed his gratitude to the countries that had supported the information centres through the provision of premises and voluntary contributions.

8. Budget constraints would also adversely affect the webcasting of sessions of the Human Rights Council in Geneva for, in 2007, the General Assembly had rejected a proposal for additional funding. Accordingly, it would not be possible to continue webcasting Council meetings in Geneva without negatively impacting the webcasting of other activities at Headquarters.

9. The Capital Master Plan would have a severe impact on the ongoing efforts to preserve audio-visual archives of the United Nations. While the process of

digitizing the photographic collections should be completed within the next few months, preserving the film and video collections would be more difficult. The Department intended to move the analogue collection during the renovation work, but the Plan did not provide for air-conditioned facilities in which to archive the collection. Solving the problem would require funding and he therefore called upon Committee members to lend their support in that regard.

10. **The Chairman** said that the Committee would hold an interactive dialogue on the item, and invited members to put questions to the Under-Secretary-General.

11. **Mr. Blair** (Antigua and Barbuda), speaking on behalf of the Group of 77 and China, expressed concern about the proposal to transform the *UN Chronicle* into a journal entitled "*UN Affairs*" and asked whether the *UN Chronicle* would be continued and whether the new journal's editorial policy and core audience would remain the same.

12. **Mr. Badji** (Senegal) asked what was being done to ensure parity among official languages and to address discrimination against non-English speaking delegations with respect to document availability. Noting that the United Nations information centre in Senegal, like other information centres, feared for its future, he wondered what impact the proposed rationalization would have on the information centre network.

13. **Mr. Cruan** (France), speaking on behalf of the European Union, asked whether the "red spot" system used on security passes to identify media representatives during ministerial week would be continued.

14. He also requested confirmation that the phasing of the *UN Chronicle* into the new *UN Affairs* journal would, indeed, have no programme budget implications and for clarification as to the intended target audience for the new booklet entitled *Building a Stronger UN for a Better World: The Secretary-General's Vision* and whether it was to be made available in all official languages. The Under-Secretary-General might also indicate how Member States could best provide support for events such as the *UN Book Days*, which had been held two weeks earlier.

15. Speaking in his national capacity, he echoed the concerns raised by the previous speaker.

16. **Mr. Akasaka** (Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information), responding first to the representative of Antigua and Barbuda, said that if Member States so wished, publication of *UN Chronicle* would resume until a decision was reached with respect to "*UN Affairs*". Editorial policy would continue to ensure fair geographical representation, gender balance and ongoing quality improvement. It was to be hoped that heads of States would be among the contributors, as had been planned for *UN Affairs*. The *UN Chronicle* would be made widely available, in both print and online editions, and its academic outreach potential would be explored.

17. After assuring the representative of Senegal that the Department would be working to strengthen the capacities of the United Nations Information Centre in Dakar, he said that it attached great importance to parity among the Organization's official languages, including with respect to documentation, staff recruitment, and the Department's own information products. As Coordinator for Multilingualism, he would be reporting to the General Assembly, in early 2009, on specific measures being undertaken throughout the Secretariat to address the issue.

18. In response to the representative of France, he said that the Department would continue to issue representatives of the media with "red spots" on their identification badges during ministerial week and that consultations would be held with the Department of Safety and Security to clarify remaining issues.

19. In light of the current budgetary situation, it was not his intention to request additional resources for *UN Affairs*. The booklet outlining the Secretary-General's vision would be distributed as widely as possible, including to permanent missions and the general public.

20. **Mr. Taleb** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that, despite repeated requests from his delegation, the Department had yet to take the technical measures required to accommodate the unique characteristics of the Arabic language. The Arabic versions of several United Nations websites for which the Department was responsible were poorly designed compared with those in other languages. In addition, they contained numerous linguistic and orthographic errors.

21. Finally, he wished to know why the annual international media seminar on peace in the Middle East had been delayed.

22. **Mr. Kanaan** (Observer for Palestine) asked why the report of the Secretary-General had failed to mention efforts undertaken in implementation of General Assembly resolution 62/82 on the Department's special information programme on the question of Palestine.

23. **Mr. Wada** (Japan) expressed support for the Department's efforts to strengthen multilingualism and enquired about the financial implications of the transition from *UN Chronicle* to "*UN Affairs*".

24. **Mr. Akasaka** (Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information), responding first to the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic, said that the international media seminar had been delayed because replies had not been immediately forthcoming from the Member States which had been approached to host the seminar. The Government of Austria had proposed to host the seminar in Vienna in early December.

25. Turning to the issue raised by the observer for Palestine, he said that the report of the Secretary-General was not meant to provide a comprehensive overview of the Department's work; rather, it focused on activities undertaken since the thirtieth session of the Committee on Information. The Department's training programme for Palestinian broadcasters and journalists was already under way and would be included in the following year's report, as would an update on the rest of the Department's activities relating to Palestine.

26. The Department would be seeking to address ongoing concerns about the quality of the translation into Arabic of some of its products, including the website. It would welcome further advice in that regard from interested delegations.

27. **Mr. Taleb** (Syrian Arab Republic), said that he could still not understand why an entire section on Palestine had disappeared from the Secretary-General's report. At the very least, mention should have been made of *The question of Palestine and the United Nations*, one of the Department's recent publications.

28. **Mr. Suárez Salvia** (Argentina) said that the issue of multilingualism concerned the entire Organization, not just the Department. The latter was making laudable efforts to make information available to the public not only in the official languages, but in up to 130 other languages.

29. **Mr. Akasaka** (Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information), said that the Department was doing its best to ensure parity among all official languages as well as to increase use of other languages such as Portuguese and Kiswahili. Resources were the major obstacle. The new United Nations information centres website http://unic.un.org contained links to the websites of 63 information centres in 33 different languages and provided unique access to content in 130 local languages.

30. Turning to the remarks made by the representative of Japan concerning the proposed transition of *UN Chronicle* into *UN Affairs*, he said that he hoped that a consensus decision would soon be reached though consultations with Member States.

31. With regard to the remarks made by the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic, he said that every effort would be made not to repeat past errors. It could not be concluded that the Department did not accord due importance to its activities regarding Palestine. It would do its best to ensure that those activities were adequately reflected in future reports.

32. **The Chairman** invited the Committee to continue with its general debate on the item.

33. **Ms. Hamilton Brown** (Jamaica), speaking on behalf of the 14 member States of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), noting that the United Nations website had been made more accessible to persons with disabilities, said that CARICOM looked forward to all web pages becoming fully compliant with accessibility guidelines. The annual Journalists' Fellowship Programme, which in 2008 had included among its participants a journalist from the Caribbean Territory of Saint Kitts and Nevis, was important in training and encouraging journalists from the developing world.

34. The United Nations website was the most reliable source of up-to-date information on United Nations activities. Nevertheless, in developing regions, traditional means of communication, in particular radio and the print media, remained the most widely used sources. Thus, it was commendable that the Department was relying more on partnerships with international broadcasters to make United Nations

radio programmes more widely available in the six official languages and two non-official languages.

35. While information and communications technologies had great potential for helping developing countries to meet their socio-economic goals in all sectors, in order for that potential to be realized it was necessary to mobilize additional resources. CARICOM itself was drafting a strategy and action plan on the use of information and communications technology for development.

36. More should be done to ensure that all United Nations publications and press releases were published in the six official languages on an equal footing. The plan to have the *UN Chronicle* evolve into *UN Affairs* would in fact do away with any multilingual publication. The process of selecting contributors to *UN Affairs*, the absence of a governing editorial policy and the need for circulation to the widest possible audience were also matters of concern.

37. Two monumental anniversaries were approaching: the sixtieth anniversary of both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and of United Nations peacekeeping operations. The activities undertaken by the Department and its information centres would prove critical in informing the global public about them and about the Organization's role in securing human rights for all peoples and fostering world peace and security. The anniversaries were also an opportunity to reinforce the international community's commitment to those goals.

38. Unfortunately, the Organization's peacekeeping record continued to be tarnished by the actions of a small minority who committed acts of sexual abuse and exploitation while on peacekeeping missions. In communicating the Organization's zero tolerance policy and reinforcing the image of the United Nations as a bastion for justice, equality and the protection of universal human rights, the Department had helped lessen such occurrences and was to be commended.

39. The CARICOM member States also congratulated the Department for successfully staging the first annual commemorative event to mark the two-hundredth anniversary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade earlier in the year.

40. **Ms. Etomzini** (Libyan Arab Jamahiriya) said that her delegation was concerned that the report did not contain any information on the question of Palestine, particularly in view of the war crimes being perpetrated against the Palestinians of the Gaza Strip.

41. Although information programmes were primarily a national responsibility, the United Nations nonetheless had an important role to play in devising an appropriate mechanism that would help to bridge the digital divide between developed and developing States. Lastly, she stressed the importance of parity among the six official languages of the Organization, although her delegation understood that the Department was faced with certain constraints in that regard.

42. **Mr. Myint** (Myanmar) observed that the United Nations could play a vital role in addressing a host of major issues of the day but its success would depend on the level of support it received from the international community. The Department of Public Information, had found innovative and creative ways of strengthening that support through outreach activities and accurate, impartial and timely information about the work of the United Nations. Increased integration of the United Nations information centres with the United Nations country teams, and further expansion of the Department's media services had been useful in mobilizing that support. As the Department's focal points, nationally and regionally, the centres should be given the resources they needed.

43. The developing countries were concerned about continuing imbalances in the field of information and communication. Most often, the reporting of events in the developing countries was biased or distorted. The growing digital divide was largely at fault, and the Department of Public Information could do much to bridge it. In addition, the international media occasionally created misconceptions about the United Nations; unless those misconceptions could be dispelled in a timely fashion, the Organization's image would be tarnished. The Department should respond promptly and objectively using both traditional and non-traditional means to reach as vast an audience as possible.

44. Finally, his delegation commended the Department for its three-tier pricing policy for United Nations publications that had made them more affordable in developed countries. Since those on sale at Headquarters were relatively expensive, the Department should consider outsourcing their production. The proposed publication of "*UN Affairs*"

would be followed with keen interest by many delegations.

45. **The Chairman**, speaking as the representative of Egypt, said that, in view of the rapid pace of technological change and the North-South digital divide, it was imperative to develop a new and more just worldwide information system based on equality and mutual respect between civilizations. That placed a particular burden on the United Nations to shoulder its responsibility to strengthen international cooperation in respect of information.

46. It was incumbent on the Department to enhance its coverage of priority issues on the agenda of the United Nations. To that end, it should endeavour to strengthen the role of the United Nations information centres in Cairo, Mexico City and Pretoria, extend the Organization's information network throughout the world, particularly in developing and least developed countries, while respecting regional characteristics and also continue its programmes in support of economic and social development as well as its special information programme on Palestine.

47. In that connection, his delegation was disappointed to see that the report contained no information on the question of Palestine and looked forward to receiving an explanation for that omission. He hoped that it had not been caused by political considerations. While the Department was to be commended for producing a pilot edition of "*UN Affairs*", the new magazine was focused on a narrow audience and had not been released in all official languages. He reiterated the importance of achieving parity among the six official languages on the United Nations website.

48. **Mr. Anwar** (India) said that the Department of Public Information was the crucial conduit for the flow of information between the United Nations, Member States, the media, civil society and the public at large; its success would be measured by its ability to meet its goals within limited resources.

49. In the developing countries, traditional means of communication, including radio and print, were still very relevant for spreading the United Nations message, and his delegation therefore urged the Department to use a combination of traditional means and modern technologies. Also, more local content and involvement in the production of programmes would make the latter more relevant.

50. The role of the United Nations information centres was critical — especially in the developing countries — and they should be adequately funded. The Department should consult closely with the host — and other — countries when introducing innovations. The development of websites in local languages must remain a primary concern; in that connection his delegation welcomed the Department's efforts to post programmes on the United Nations Radio website in Asian languages.

51. The Department should cover the Organization's most noteworthy activities, especially those that had a direct impact upon the lives of ordinary people, such as humanitarian activities and the work of the United Nations peacekeepers. It should work closely with the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and the Department of Field Support in highlighting their success stories, because accounts of goodwill and down-to-earth cooperation could go a long way towards creating a positive image of the United Nations.

52. *Mr. Elsherbini (Egypt), Vice-Chairman, took the Chair.*

53. **Ms. El Alaoui** (Morocco) noting with satisfaction the Department's reporting on the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and of peacekeeping operations said that the events celebrating that latter seemed to be somewhat selective. It was important to recognize the role and sacrifices of all troop-contributing countries. For example, since 1960 Morocco had deployed over 50,000 troops in 13 peacekeeping operations, thereby contributing steadily to United Nations operations in that area.

54. Morocco, a country of varied cultures and civilizations, was sponsoring a number of interreligious and intercultural dialogues and believed that the United Nations should encourage such dialogue in order to combat the spread of Islamophobia. The Department of Public Information had a vital role to play in such efforts and should adopt a strategy of promoting rapprochement between religions, cultures and civilizations on the basis of dialogue, tolerance and mutual respect.

55. The Department should also highlight the role of the United Nations information centres. The current rationalization and restructuring of the network should not be dictated primarily by budgetary considerations but rather by an awareness of the contribution the

centres were making, in developing countries in particular.

56. By promoting international cooperation and mobilizing necessary funds, the Department, was a major force in narrowing the digital divide between North and South, encouraging the sharing of knowledge and guaranteeing the access of developing countries to the new information and communications technologies. The current imbalance in the Department's use of the six official languages needed to be remedied in the interests of linguistic parity and multilingualism. In that connection, the proposed new publication "*UN Affairs*" should also be made available in the six official languages, and its contents and political orientation as a voice of the United Nations should be decided by Member States.

57. **Mr. Jalil** (Pakistan) said that despite financial constraints, the Department had made commendable efforts to increase awareness of the achievements of and challenges faced by the United Nations. Close cooperation between the Department and substantive departments was of supreme importance, especially in connection with the role of the Strategic Communications Division in delivering and disseminating United Nations messages and promoting issues of interest to the international community.

58. His delegation attached high priority to the work of the United Nations Information Centres around the world, and was confident that the Department would continue to strengthen those centres.

59. Freedom of expression was a universal right that should nevertheless be exercised in a spirit of social responsibility. As one of its first actions, the newly elected Government of Pakistan had tabled legislation in the parliament to reverse all laws impinging on the freedom of the mass media. Pakistan was also one of the few countries in which Government policies had created an enabling environment for the private sector to drive growth in electronic media, as evidenced by the fact that 22 television channels and 64 FM radio stations had been granted broadcast licences.

60. In closing, he reiterated the request of other Member States that the Secretariat should provide additional passes to allow press officers to gain access to restricted areas and thus be able to report effectively on high-level meetings.

61. **Mr. Liu** Yutong (China) said that China appreciated the Department's efforts over the past year to better accomplish its mission of publicizing United Nations activities throughout the world. The United Nations had a unique role to play in addressing the many global issues confronting the international community, and the Department should redouble its efforts to promote the United Nations spirit of equality, mutual benefit and cooperation and encourage Governments and peoples of all countries to meet the challenges together. It should also remain committed to facilitating cultural exchanges between countries, strengthening dialogue among civilizations, and promoting friendly contacts among non-governmental organizations, civil society, academic institutions and the media, as well as youth exchanges among countries.

62. To better address current global challenges, especially those brought about by the financial, energy and food crises, and to promote a balanced, impartial and effective new order for information and communication, the Department needed to increase its focus on development issues and encourage the media and the public to promote common development and prosperity around the globe. It should provide accurate, objective information and continue to promote dialogue and exchanges among civilizations while encouraging and guiding the mass media to promote harmony and development of various cultures. Efforts should also be made to ensure that developing countries benefited from modern communication technologies; the information activities of the United Nations should narrow the existing disparities among countries and regions in the flow of information.

63. Finally, the Department should expand cooperation and exchanges with the media of developing countries, and provide more human resources and technological assistance to strengthen their capacity to develop and disseminate information. He also encouraged it to continue its training and internship programmes for journalists from developing countries, and suggested that it should make greater efforts to accommodate the needs of media from developing countries when organizing media pools.

64. **Mr. Bakhtin** (Russian Federation) said that his delegation was encouraged by the Department's efforts to highlight United Nations priority issues in the areas of peace and security, development and human rights. It welcomed the ongoing rationalization of United

Nations information centres, including the strategic redistribution of resources, expanded use of the information and communication technologies (ICT) and enhanced cooperation at the regional level. Only by effectively countering misinformation about the work of the United Nations could the Department and its network of information centres improve the Organization's public image. The United Nations information centre in Moscow served to raise awareness of the United Nations not only in the Russian Federation, but throughout the Commonwealth of Independent States.

65. Noting that the Department was expanding United Nations radio and internet services to include all official languages, he said that Russian language provision should also be strengthened in all areas. His delegation looked forward to participating in further consultations on the proposed transition of the *UN Chronicle* into *UN Affairs*; the latter should appear in all official languages. His delegation also supported the Department's efforts to bridge the digital divide and ensure that people everywhere had equal access to the benefits of the information society.

66. Noting the reference in paragraph 54 of the Secretary-General's report to the observance of the International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust, he expressed the hope that the event would become a tradition. Commemoration of the Holocaust would be incomplete without a mention of the liberators, including the Soviet troops that had liberated the Auschwitz camp. In its efforts to raise awareness of the Holocaust, the Department should ensure that it included relevant and accurate information on the outcome of the Second World War. All attempts to rewrite history should be suppressed; the glorification in some countries of Nazi sympathizers, and the destruction of memorials to members of the anti-Hitler resistance, represented an alarming trend.

67. **Ms. Raz-Shechter** (Israel) said that the Department's task of conveying the United Nations message and ideals to the world was being made even more difficult by the growing cynicism and disbelief in wor d institutions.

68. Her delegation commended the Department for its efforts to promote Holocaust remembrance around the world noting that the "Holocaust and the United Nations outreach programme" had served as an effective tool for education and remembrance. During the past year, the Department had implemented a strategy to create the multifaceted Holocaust education programme; in collaboration with civil society groups and experts in the field of Holocaust and genocide studies, the Department was effectively educating future generations on the dangers of hate, bigotry and anti-Semitism. Nearly all the United Nations information centres had participated in training seminars under the programme, and a large number of field offices had organized Holocaust Remembrance Day observances and other activities. The Department's work on Holocaust awareness demonstrated inter alia the evolving educational role of the United Nations in the twenty-first century, and the Department's work in that area should be further supported by other Member States.

69. In conjunction with the long-standing Israeli initiative to educate the public on the principles and actions of the United Nations, her delegation invited the Department to open an information centre in Israel to foster dialogue and cooperation in the region. Israel's unique status as a multilingual and multicultural democracy and as the birthplace of the world's three great monotheistic religions, offered a unique opportunity for the Department.

70. However, her delegation was disappointed at the one-sided, biased and misleading picture of the facts on the ground in the Middle East put out by the special information programme on the question of Palestine. Given the Department's tight budget, it was her delegation's belief that by allowing that Programme to continue, the United Nations was failing to address more important priorities.

71. **Mr. Akasaka** (Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information) said that he was grateful to the members of the Committee for their comments, and assured them that the issues they had raised would be treated on a priority basis over the coming months. Finally, he said that he hoped to ensure that the objectives of the United Nations were communicated to the public in an impartial, coherent and timely manner.

The meeting rose at 6 p.m.